DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

A NEVERWINTER™ NOVELLA



COLD STEEL AND SECRETS

ROSEMARY JONES

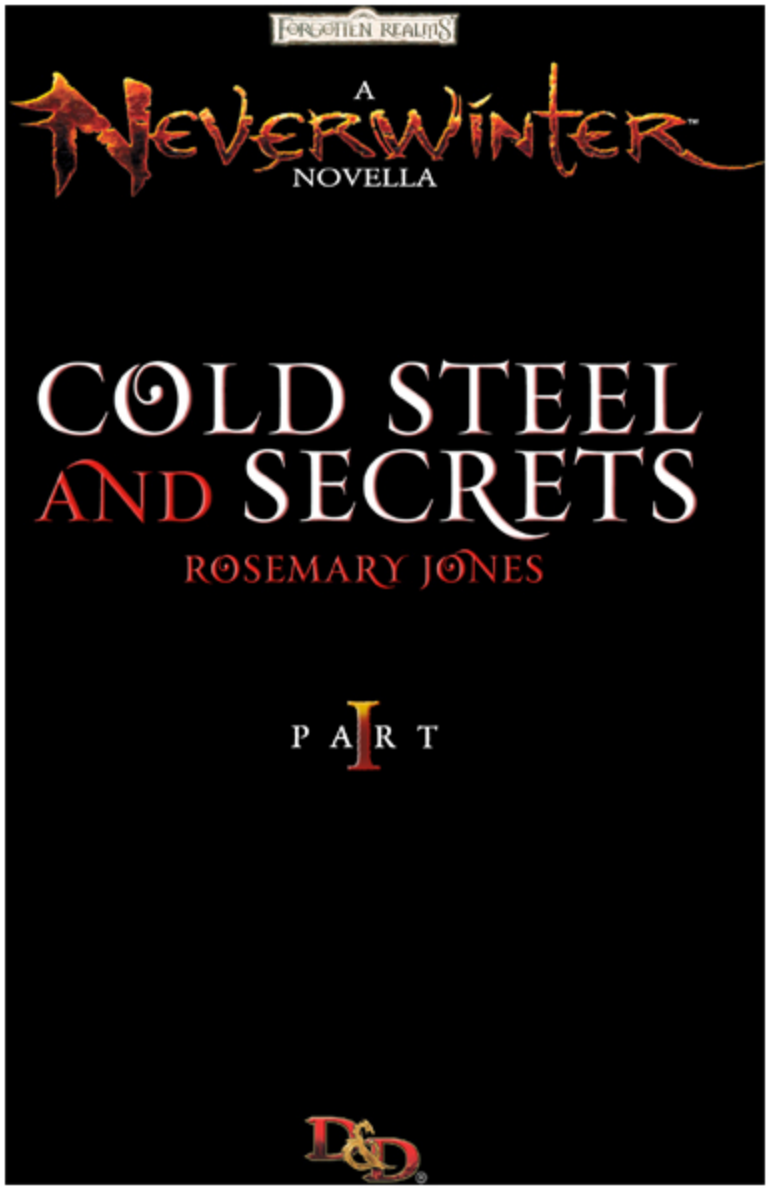
PART I



ALSO BY ROSEMARY JONES

ED GREENWOOD PRESENTS WATERDEEP
City of the Dead

THE DUNG
ONS *Crypt of the Moaning Diamond*


FORGOTTEN REALMS
A
NEVERWINTER
NOVELLA
COLD STEEL
AND SECRETS
ROSEMARY JONES
PART I
D&D

COLD STEEL AND SECRETS:
A NEVERWINTER NOVELLA
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Part One: 1478 DR

Welcome to Faerûn, a land of magic and intrigue, brutal violence and divine compassion, where gods have ascended and died, and mighty heroes have risen to fight terrifying monsters. Here, millennia of warfare and conquest have shaped dozens of unique cultures, raised and leveled shining kingdoms and tyrannical empires alike, and left long forgotten, horror-infested ruins in their wake.

A LAND OF MAGIC

When the goddess of magic was murdered, a magical plague of blue fire—the Spellplague—swept across the face of Faerûn, killing some, mutilating many, and imbuing a rare few with amazing supernatural abilities. The Spellplague forever changed the nature of magic itself, and seeded the land with hidden wonders and bloodcurdling monstrosities.

A LAND OF DARKNESS

The threats Faerûn faces are legion. Armies of undead mass in Thay under the brilliant but mad lich king Szass Tam. Treacherous dark elves plot in the Underdark in the service of their cruel and fickle goddess, Lolth. The Abolethic Sovereignty, a terrifying hive of inhuman slave masters, floats above the Sea of Fallen Stars, spreading chaos and destruction. And the Empire of Netheril, armed with magic of unimaginable power, prowls Faerûn in flying fortresses, sowing discord to their own incalculable ends.

A LAND OF HEROES

But Faerûn is not without hope. Heroes have emerged to fight the growing tide of darkness. Battle-scarred rangers bring their notched blades to bear against marauding hordes of orcs. Lowly street rats match wits with demons for the fate of cities. Inscrutable tiefling warlocks unite with fierce elf warriors to rain fire and steel upon monstrous enemies. And valiant servants of merciful gods forever struggle against the darkness.



A LAND OF UNTOLD ADVENTURE


Neverwinter
River District
Blacklake District
Protector's Enclave
1. Hall of Justice
2. House of Knowledge
3. Claven's General Supplies and Armory
4. Hallowed Temple of Selûne
5. Moonstone Mask
6. The Wall
7. Neverdeath, Main Graveyard
8. Neverdeath, Pauper's Section
9. Tarmalune Trade House
10. Driftwood Tavern
11. Beached Leviathan
12. Blacklake
13. Fisher's Float
14. Pirate's Skyhold
15. Vellgard Manor
16. House of a Thousand Faces
17. The Fallen Tower
18. Shard of Night
19. Cloak Tower
20. The Chasm
21. Upland Rise
N

There is nothing more necessary than good spies to frustrate a designing enemy, and nothing more difficult to obtain and to control as you wish.

—Dhafiyand of Neverwinter

PART ONE

1478 DR

The open grave gaped at the side of the road. Rucas Sarfael drew rein and dismounted. The dirt looked recently disturbed.

His gelding shivered and stamped, but its war training held and the bay stood steady as he cast along the road for signs of the undead.

In the pale pre-dawn light, Sarfael saw fresh tracks leading off the road and down toward the river. He remounted. Drawing Mavreen's sword, he set his horse to follow, all the urgency of Dhafiyand's recent summons forgotten as he hunted along the trail.

By the second night of his three days of hard riding from Waterdeep, he had started hearing tales about the newly awakened dead. All the stories and the storytellers came from Neverwinter. And the storytellers drank their ale quickly, bolted their food faster, and then counseled him not to make the journey to that cursed city. The advice he ignored, having business there, but he listened closely to their mutterings about the ambulatory dead and questioned them as much as he dared about what they'd seen and where.

Sarfael found the fledgling revenant shambling along the weed-choked bank. Like all wise animals, his horse shied nervously away from the undead creature, the smell alone driving it back. But Sarfael forced it forward.

The revenant turned and clawed at the horse and rider, a howl rising from its rotting mouth. The stench of the grave rolled off it in nauseating waves. The bay sidestepped with precision, commanded by its rider's steady hands on the reins. Screaming undead needed to attack in packs of twenty or more to make Sarfael sweat. Even then,

he only looked for a way to escape and come back another day to burn them out of their nest.

One lone corpse did not frighten him. When he looked into its face, he saw only the face of a stranger. He had never known the man raised untimely from his grave.

“Good night, stranger,” Sarfael said. He leaned forward in his saddle. With one slashing downward stroke of Mavreen’s sharp blade, he sent its head tumbling into the river. The body collapsed.

Morning birds burst into song before Sarfael finished reburying the headless body in its grave. He thought briefly about abandoning it there by the side of the road. With the head well on its way to the sea, it probably would not rise again. But somebody had cared enough to level the ground over the dead man the first time, and he would not like for them to find a father, a brother, or a lover missing from his grave. He knew too well the pain that such a sight could bring, having tracked her corpse from the grave to their final confrontation in that crumbling little temple.

So he sweated in the chill dawn air, using his bare hands to shovel piles of dirt over a stinking corpse. Finally, he pulled himself onto the gelding, which pawed and bucked at his stench.

With a sigh, Sarfael surveyed the damage to his best cloak and boots. His grave grubbing left him muddy to the knees and probably in no fit condition for an audience with Neverwinter’s great spymaster. Still he couldn’t have left the corpse to rot in the open air.

“Because you’re a fool,” Mavreen whispered in his head.

Sarfael grinned at the memory of her scolding voice, just as he had once grinned and winked at her when she rode at his side, pointing out the flaws in his madcap plans. “Ah, no, my darling,” he said. “A sentimental man, that’s me.”

Then he clapped his heels to the gelding’s sides. Dhafiyand wanted him in Neverwinter and he had tarried long enough upon the road.

The horse cantered out of the marshy little valley. Sarfael rode with Mavreen’s sword still out, an altogether precarious position, as she would have delighted in telling him. But he would not sheathe

the blade before he cleaned it. Until then, he rode with the naked sword gripped in his hand, his face set toward Neverwinter, and his thoughts, as always, entangled in the past.



Rucas Sarfael waited patiently in the antechamber for Dhafiyand's summons. After the long ride from Waterdeep, he welcomed a moment to stand before the fire burning in the grate and let his boots steam dry. Little clots of grave dirt dropped from his cloak onto Dhafiyand's finely woven carpet.

While he waited, Sarfael slid Mavreen's sword out of his scabbard and sighted down the blade. It shone brightly in the firelight. Satisfied that the blade was immaculate after his hasty cleaning in Dhafiyand's stables, he sheathed it again.

One of the spymaster's black-clad servants slithered into the room. "He will see you now."

Sarfael followed the man to the chamber where Dhafiyand carried out the business of secrets for Lord Neverember.

The spymaster sat at the long wooden table littered with reports, accounts, charts, maps, and piles of books. When Sarfael entered, Dhafiyand shot one quick look at him and nodded to the servant to leave the room.

"You're late," complained the old man as he shuffled through his papers. "I expected you days ago."

"I came by horse, not by sea," answered Sarfael, shifting the sword on his hip so he could settle into the deep wooden chair facing Dhafiyand. "And I came as quickly as I could without killing my nag."

Dhafiyand looked up from his reports at that. "Why not take a ship?"

"The ports are watched, in Waterdeep and here, by too many eyes. I thought you would want my comings and goings unremarked."

"Most of those eyes owe loyalty to me," Dhafiyand replied, "and I needed you here most urgently."

“Forty days ago, you needed me most urgently in Waterdeep. You are lucky the business there took so little time and I did not have to leave it undone.”

“So there is no more gold for the Sons of Alagondar?”

“Not from that merchant. No matter his birth in Neverwinter, he values his business in Waterdeep too much these days. And some cur, or so he called me when last we met, let too many of his trade secrets slip to his rivals. It will take him a long time to recover his wealth. What he has left, he needs at home, not funding rebellions abroad.”

“Satisfactory,” murmured Dhafiyand. “And you think he will indeed stop his meddling in others’ plans?”

“I left a fair amount of your coin scattered around. A maid with a keen eye and good penmanship will send copies of his correspondence every tenday. For a rich man, he pays his staff poorly and they know it.”

The faintest hint of a smile crossed the old man’s face. He loved information—the world’s gossip, as he called it. No doubt the merchant’s letters would join a hundred such in some neatly labeled box. They might never be read or they might be used to trip up another schemer or capture another pretender to Neverwinter’s throne. It mattered very little to Sarfael. He’d done the task requested. “Do you have more interesting work, such as tracking those rumors of Thayan interests in the city?” Sarfael asked. “I found more than one grave open on the ride here.”

“Wild animals, perhaps,” Dhafiyand shrugged. “Ghost stories, to frighten children.”

“Neither ghost stories nor wild animals cause the dead to walk. I dispatched one corpse into the river this morning,” Sarfael told him.

The spymaster frowned. “A leftover from the unpleasantness of the past.”

“Hardly. This body was fresh. The Red Wizards have returned. I know it.”

Dhafiyand tapped one thin finger on the table. “Your obsession with the undead will be your ruination. Rumors of Thay and Red Wizards are simply that. Rumors. Whispers on the wind.”

Sarfael stifled his protests. Years of verbal dueling with the old man taught him that once Dhafiyand was set upon a course, it took careful prodding and poking to turn him toward Sarfael's own interests.

"Look to the real threat: these so-called Sons of Alagondar and their youngest adherents, the restless ones who gnash their teeth at authority and take that for their name," Dhafiyand said. "If these Nashers go unchecked, Lord Neverember's plans crumble and our fortunes with him. I need sharp-toothed hounds to set upon their trail and pull them down, not foolish men wanting to hunt animated corpses in back alleys."

"You were glad enough to find me in that alley that day," Sarfael pointed out. The old man often acted as if he owned him, but Sarfael considered himself a free man, able to come and go as he pleased. Right now, it pleased him to be in Neverwinter and it pleased him even more that Dhafiyand was willing to pay him to be there.

"You have your uses," said Dhafiyand, "when you keep your mind upon the task." He reached out one long, ink-stained hand and shuffled through a stack of papers, pulling out a small scroll and regarding it with a frown.

From where he sat, Sarfael thought it looked like a map of Neverwinter's defensives, the division of the city into its unsafe, but often patrolled, precincts and its truly dangerous neighborhoods. It was no Luskan, but then Luskan's dangers were primarily living creatures, not all human but mostly so. Neverwinter's recent cataclysms were tinged with foul magic and even, some muttered, divine meddling. Sarfael rather doubted that the gods cared much for Neverwinter, but he truly believed that the city attracted more than its fair share of undead and their creators. As long as Mavreen's sword hung at his hip, he would use it on such creatures.

Sarfael stretched out his legs, crossing his ankles and letting his chin slump down to his chest. Today, he might be Dhafiyand's hunting dog, but it never paid to let the old man think that he could snap his fingers and command him upon the instant. "Do you have work for me or not?" he said.

The spymaster merely gave a grunt and selected another scroll.

Sarfael considered, as he had many times in the past, whether the coin he was paid was worth the aggravation of waiting upon the old man's torturous plotting and planning, his neverending capacity for contemplation before he acted. Typical of him to fuss over Sarfael's delay and then not speak out—it was all part of his tricks and Sarfael felt the old resentment rise up. Once he had been a masterless man, and quite content to be so. Now Neverwinter's spymaster moved him to and fro like a piece in some elaborate game.

Yet—and there was always that "yet" resounding in Sarfael's mind—Dhafiyand of Neverwinter collected every whisper breathed in the streets, knew every tale tracking through the taverns, and kept stacks of secrets in the papers rustling beneath those long ink-stained fingers. If ever a man could lead Sarfael to the lair of the Red Wizards operating in Neverwinter, it would be Dhafiyand. In the end, he would come to see them as much a threat to Neverwinter's peace as the Sons of Alagondar. And Sarfael would be ready to help him burn them out of Neverwinter and chase them all the way back to Thay if he had to. He might not have been able to save Mavreen, but he could make sure that he never again saw a friend's body rise from a grave.

So Sarfael waited, listening to the fire crackle in the grate. Late in the season, and Dhafiyand still had fires going in every room of his house, a small luxury in a poor city, but a telling one. Letting his gaze slide around the room, Sarfael noted the exits as he always did, but also the silver candlesticks, a painted miniature framed in silver upon the old man's table, the fine porcelain bowl filled with dried herbs and blossoms to scent the air, and the woolen tapestries draped across the walls to block drafts.

Dhafiyand picked up a pen, dipped the end in a crystal inkpot, and then made a brief note in the margin of one page. Only then did he look up at Sarfael.

"What do you know of bladedancing?" he said.

"A fancy name for those who like to fight with the tip as well as the edge of the sword while following set figures with the hands,

wrists, arms, and so on," Sarfael responded. "Although the definition varies by city and by teacher. Some believe that the flourishing of the blade and the posturing prior to the engagement leads to a fairer fight. Myself, I prefer the deft strike and the dead opponent over fine form or fairness."

"But you could pretend an interest and skill in the art of the duel?"

"I thought dueling was outlawed in Neverwinter, by order of our most gracious General Sabine?"

"On the streets and in the taverns, yes. But there is a certain gathering place, a school for the elegant arts of fighting, as its mistress calls it. There, they engage in practice bouts, seeking to dissect and study the various styles practiced by blademasters along the coast. Also, the lady in charge, one Elyne Tschavarz, assures me that dueling is not allowed. Simply the teaching of various methods to improve the stance, strength, and grace of her students."

Sarfael fingered the blackhorned hilt of Mavreen's sword. "And do you not find her students graceful and gracious?"

"I find them to be a troublesome nest of fledgling rebels, most likely Nashers," snapped Dhafiyand with more heat than Sarfael had ever heard from the old man. "However, a great many have ties to the old nobility of Neverwinter and Elyne Tschavarz herself has family in Waterdeep as well, family known to Lord Neverember."

"Ah," said Sarfael. "And our great lord has met her."

"In his last visit, he remarked upon her charm and called her 'cousin' at a dinner."

"Ah," said Sarfael again. Dhafiyand would not like to act openly against one who had attracted his lord's flirtatious attention, especially one with noble ties to other powerful families in both Neverwinter and Waterdeep.

Dhafiyand pursed his lips and nodded at Sarfael's unspoken assessment of the situation. So many years of plotting together often left them without the need for words. "This Elyne plays the game of fealty to Neverember well and can bend her head when she needs to. But look close and see how she is glancing all around while she does it. A pretty ruffian, I name her, and dangerous."

Sarfael raised his own head and looked his master straight in the eye. “And wily enough to escape your nets?”

“A delicate approach is dictated. Every attempt to infiltrate her school has proved futile,” Dhafiyand went on. “I have had my best sent back to me on stretchers—each with a politely worded note from the lady decrying the carelessness of her students and their eagerness to try the untested with such thrusts and counterattacks as they have been studying!”

“And you want to send me there to have my skin pricked and my blood upon their points? Very kind of you.”

“I expect you to show more skill than the dolts now recovering upstairs,” grumbled Dhafiyand. “And cost me less in healer fees.”

“And if I do find the lady teaches rebellion along with thrust and counterthrust, then what do I do?”

“Learn their plans and confound them before they become troublesome. Lord Neverember returns to Neverwinter soon, and I would not have his visit disturbed by such rabble as these so-called Nashers.”

“Last I saw the great lord, he was dancing measures in Waterdeep and seemed content enough there.”

“He holds court where he must, and soon it must be here,” Dhafiyand said. “He means to announce new plans for the rebuilding of the city.”

Sarfael shrugged. No matter what dreams were entertained by Lord Neverember or the rival remnants of Neverwinter’s nobility, the city could never regain its fabled past. The plagues that had decimated its population and the natural disasters that had toppled its grand houses meant it would never again command the Sword Coast as once it had.

“Is this Elyne one of the leaders of the Nashers?” Sarfael asked.

“Well regarded, perhaps, and trusted with certain plans, but the true leaders meet elsewhere. Still, she could well advance within their ranks. I deem it best to nip that ambition before it blooms. Or prune it in such a way that it serves our interests and not theirs.”

“Then I go and cross my humble sword with the lady. I trust you will have hot water and clean bandages waiting should I not

succeed.”

Dhafiyand scowled at him. “Better I should have a horse and carriage waiting for us both. Lord Neverember dislikes constant failure and the continued growth of the Nasher’s ranks must rankle.”

Sarfael permitted himself a wide grin at the spymaster’s tirade. “The only one rankled is yourself. As you said, our Open Lord of Waterdeep finds the lady charming. Further, he would only notice a rebellion if it took place directly under his nose. That is why he pays you and the excellent general to keep order in Neverwinter: she in the open streets and you in its shadows.”

“Go on. Flattery will not increase your fee. And, before you make your bow to Elyne Tschavarz, clean those boots. The lady will be more impressed.”

Sarfael cocked a leg and examined his boots. Trust the old man to notice everything while pretending to pay attention only to his papers.

“They are a trifle filthy,” he said.

“Mud to the knee. You look as if you have been grave robbing yourself.”

“No, just grave digging. Or reburying, if you prefer.”

Dhafiyand snorted, a surprisingly inelegant sound from the spymaster. “I will expect your first report within three days.”

Sarfael bowed himself out of the door with a flourish, but Dhafiyand’s head was bent over his documents and he paid him no heed.

The school, if it could truly be called such, was located in a warehouse near the docks. A sharp yeasty smell proclaimed its past affiliation with the abandoned brewery next door.

Vats were shoved against the walls, some painted with targets or wreathed in straw bundles, and many scarred with blows from throwing axes and broadswords. Racks of weapons, primarily swords of all sizes and types, were scattered around. Sarfael

wondered that Dhafiyand would allow so many to rest in the hands of suspected rebels, but a closer glance at the blades showed them to be blunted, nicked, and, in general, of poor quality. Such swords would quickly shatter against Tarnian shields and armor, and the mercenaries certainly carried better blades for their patrols of Neverwinter.

The center of the floor was ringed with various circles marked out with white stones. Within each circle, a pair of combatants traded blows, high or low, quick or slow, as instructions were called out by a young lady standing in the center of the floor.

“Half thrust, high, disengage, full thrust, low, disengage, hold firm, point over blade, thrust out, cross blade, recover,” she chanted as the students hit their swords lightly together and than stepped apart.

Sarfael watched for a few moments, and then slowly began to clap.

The lady glanced at him. She threw her hand up in the air, signaling a stop to the others.

“You find their actions worthy of applause?” she said as she walked toward him. Sarfael noted that Dhafiyand’s earlier report of Elyne Tschavarz was absolutely correct. She was indeed quite pretty. Tall and slender, with red hair bound neatly in braids that hung down her back. She wore a black leather waistcoat with small dark buttons—a swordswoman’s waistcoat, affording no shining brass button targets, but heavy enough to turn the point of a lighter thrust. Leather guards, ringed with steel, protected her wrists and her throat. Her boots were very high, covering the vulnerable knee, but low heeled to allow for quick movement and good footing.

Himself, he favored a narrower sleeve than she sported, although he had known swordmasters who claimed such billowing sleeves helped obscure the angle of the elbow and the intention of the blow. He found watching the eyes a far better predictor of a fight than any movement of the arm. Right then, the lady’s green eyes were narrowed and noting his own accoutrements as closely as he had cataloged her trappings.

“I find the attention to their teacher admirable,” said Rucas Sarfael with as deep a bow as any lord in Waterdeep ever made to a fine lady. And while his head bobbed down, his eyes darted around the room, noting the doorways to the left and right, and the crowd of students, all armed with practice blades, gathering like a storm cloud at the lady’s back.

“And how do you find the teaching?” she asked with a tilt of the head that was both charming and, from the way the students behind her came to an abrupt halt, a well-known signal.

“That is what I would like to learn,” said Sarfael. “If allowed.”

“This is an open place, where any are welcome,” she said with fair grace for a set speech obviously well-rehearsed. “We practice for our own pleasure and health. No intentional drawing of blood, no dueling. We keep to the law and, if the law is broken, the student is expelled permanently.”

“But not fatally, I hope.”

“Of course not,” she said. “Have you heard reports otherwise of us? Some false rumor that we encourage dueling? Or perhaps a questioning of our ideals and politics.” Her hand remained curled around the hilt of her sword and her look never wavered from his face. Her stance was that of a fighter ready to draw her blade.

One eyebrow flew up as Sarfael contemplated the lady. She was, quite obviously, no idiot. No doubt the spies that Dhafiyand had sent earlier played the game as one might expect, acted the innocent fools or protested a shade too much their loyalty to Neverwinter’s past.

Well, then, he decided in the instant, he would try a different way. Show himself to be skilled and clever, an obvious rogue, and thus, by inference, not a subtle, spying one.

He grinned broadly at the swordmistress. “I have no knowledge of your politics, being somewhat newly arrived in the city, and I find dueling tedious. I came here because I was told that Elyne of Neverwinter was so lovely that even the great Lord Neverember had smiled to see her dance. Perhaps, too, I sought the making of a few friends to welcome an exile back.”

The lady blinked a little at that torrent of words. Ladies often had such a reaction to him, although most wore a warmer expression than the one displayed by the well-armed redhead.

"An exile returned home?" Elyne asked.

"The son of one. My mother's family fled the city before my birth." He considered and rejected in the space of the breath claiming an actual childhood in the city, but a foreign birth seemed harder to disprove. "She, unfortunate woman, perished long ago, when I was quite young." And thus he might blame any lack of knowledge of Neverwinter on being an orphan. Besides, the lady might be more sympathetic to an orphan. But given the hard look in her green eyes, Sarfael doubted she cared about his supposedly parentless state. He concluded his completely false tale: "But I grew up listening to her stories about the City of Skilled Hands, the Jewel of the North, and long desired to see her birthplace."

"So, a son of Neverwinter?"

"Indeed, a loyal son," he answered with great emphasis on the last word. "Or would be one. If I decide to stay in the city." There, that surprised her. She expected him to claim immediate love for the place. One did wonder what sort of fools Dhafiyand had sent there before him. A good lie, as Sarfael could have told them, required a certain confounding of the listener's expectations. "One can never predict tomorrow's adventures, no matter how much one might protest and gnash one's teeth, or so I have found."

His redheaded judge frowned at his deliberate emphasis of rebel terms, for he had said "gnash" quite as firmly as "son," but she motioned for him to step forward. "Elyne Tschavarz," she said. "My family stayed, although not without cost. Here you will find naught but loyal sons and daughters of Neverwinter."

"Save for Montimort," said one brawny youth, clapping the shoulder of the skinny young man next to him. The one named Montimort twitched away from him with a scowl.

"Oh, yes, none of us are sure what Montimort is," giggled a blonde girl carrying a practice cutlass.

"Enough," snapped Elyne. "He comes here as my friend."

“I’m just as l-l-loyal to Neverwinter as any of you,” rejoined Montimort with a scowl at his fellow students. Alone, of all the students, he carried no weapon. His dress was notably shabbier than the rest, with a patch sloppily sewn across the knee of his breeches and his cuffs clearly frayed.

A poor youth, guessed Sarfael, and one with an interesting hint of that pirate’s den Luskan in his narrow features and husky accent. One to watch closely, for the disgruntled outsider can become a spy’s best friend. The rest, he judged, were such as Dhafiyand described, young sprigs of Neverwinter’s much diminished nobility and wealthier houses.

“So you’ve come here for a lesson?” Elyne asked, and the others around her snickered.

“The first of many, I hope,” he answered with a flirtatious smile.

She ignored that, as she had ignored his earlier flattery. She must have seen similar smirks many times. If he thought he could woo her secrets from her, he needed to reconsider his plans. “You always did set too much store on a grin and a wink,” Mavreen muttered in his head.

“You may have nothing to teach me,” Sarfael said offhandedly. A puzzled expression flitted across her face—and he pressed his advantage at once. “But I am here, and I have nothing else to do for the moment.”

“Very well,” Elyne snapped back. “Let’s see how good you are.” She motioned to the center of the floor. “Stand there and let the first lesson begin.”

He strode to the center, and, at the turning motion of her fingers, twirled twice in place. She motioned him to stand still and then turned to the other students.

“So, now you’ve taken a good look at him, how do you judge him?”

The brawny youth swaggered forward. “Old, and perhaps not as quick as some.”

Elyne looked Sarfael up and down. “Five-and-thirty at the most. The waist is trim, the shoulders and the back straight, he favors neither the left nor the right leg in his stance.”

“Vain,” said the giggling blonde. “Look at the embroidery on his cloak and the polish on his boots. They look as if they were just shined today.”

“Cleaned, and not long ago,” Sarfael admitted with a laugh, sticking out one leg to better show off his boots. “The cloak was a most recent purchase, as the one I wore yesterday suffered some abuse. The seamstress assured me that it would find favor with Neverwinter’s ladies.”

“Dangerous,” squeaked Montimort.

Elyne smiled at the thin young man who stood close to her and nodded. “Note this one as a fighter, for his leather and harness are plain but well kept beneath that tawdry cloak. A man who pays so much attention to his gear knows how to use it.”

Sarfael coughed lightly.

“Yes?” said Elyne.

“All correct,” he said. “Save my age. Nine-and-twenty, but I have lived rough.”

She nodded. “Now turn and face the wall and describe three in the room as carefully.”

He spun to the wall and reeled off the list: “To my left, there is the stocky young lad who called me old. He favors the heavy blade, the broadsword, and depends upon those wide shoulders to beat his opponent down, flat and edge, but little point work, for his feet toe in and he’s graceless in his stance.”

A murmur from the crowd and whispers of “are you sure that you haven’t fought him, Parnadiz?”

“As for the young lady with the light laugh and the blonde curls,” Sarfael continued without pause, “she prefers the short sword and the hidden dagger, one in her boot, the other behind her back. The pretty cloak around her shoulders is merely clipped to her collar, not fastened with a chain, so she might pull it off in a hurry and use it to confuse another’s thrusts. The harlot’s trick, or so I’ve heard it called in other cities.”

There was a squeal of indignation at that, but the blonde was shushed. Sarfael checked over his shoulder for Elyne’s reaction. She looked more relaxed and slightly amused at the abuse he heaped

upon her students. He judged her a lady quick to see the foibles of others, most particularly those she taught. But, judging by her earlier defense of the boy, there was one that she favored and he turned to him last.

"Finally, I come to the youth called Montimort. His wrists are thin, his shoulders stooped, and I think he may be the most tricky of the lot, because, being a wizard, he would not depend upon the blade to defend or attack." Another murmur among the students confirmed his guess as correct.

"Enough," said Elyne. "Turn and pick an opponent and a weapon."

He spun in place and pointed at the brawny youth with an angry flush mottling his cheeks. "Let him use his broadsword. And, as an apology for any insult to her honor, I'll take the young lady's cape and let her hold my own."

And then it was Elyne who raised one questioning eyebrow at such brashness. No doubt Dhafiyand's other spies had not been so bold or so willing to expose themselves in a fight. Which, Sarfael judged, made him far less suspect in her eyes.

Parnadiz stepped forward, his practice blade already up. "Give him your cape, Charinyn."

Charinyn pulled it off and tossed it to Sarfael. He shrugged off his own, giving it to her. Then he wrapped one corner of Charinyn's much smaller cape in his left hand and nodded to Parnadiz.

The boy rushed at him, much as he predicted, with a heavy downward stroke meant to strike hard upon the upper shoulder and cripple his left arm. Sarfael stepped lightly to one side, stuck out one of his booted feet, and tripped him into stumbling. The cloak swung unused from his left hand.

With a roar and more dexterity than Sarfael would have guessed, Parnadiz kept his balance, whirled, and came charging back with a low sweeping blow to knock him off his feet. Sarfael sidestepped again, hopping neatly out of Parnadiz's reach.

Parnadiz backed up two steps and shook his head like an angry bull. "I thought you wanted to fight? Or will you keep hopping around? It's most shameful to refuse to engage."

“Oh there’s nothing ignoble about escaping a blow to the head,” said Sarfael. Then he raised the cape high and shook it at Parnadiz. “This is just for show. As long as you’re looking at it, you’re not paying enough attention to me or my quick feet.”

The boy grunted, circling left and then circling right. Sarfael stayed still in the center of the floor, tracking him only with his eyes. “I’m an old man,” he explained, pitching his voice so all could hear, “so I’m not given to such rushing around as you prefer.”

Parnadiz feigned an attack from the left, and Sarfael did not move. The boy grunted then drove forward. Sarfael lifted his left arm at the last moment, let Parnadiz’s blade slide harmlessly beneath, and then dropped the girl’s cape over the lad’s head.

Sarfael’s right hand snaked out, grabbed Parnadiz’s wrist, and twisted it hard enough to make him cry out and loose his grip upon the blade. Sarfael knocked the broadsword down to the floor, kicking it to the wall. Then, with a flourish, he pulled the cape off Parnadiz’s head and handed it back to the startled Charinyn.

Disarmed and obviously disgruntled, Parnadiz scowled at Sarfael. “I thought you said it was for show.”

“I lied,” said Sarfael. “I may do that quite often. Or I may not.”

Parnadiz ran at a nearby rack and pulled out another practice sword. “A proper fight,” he challenged Sarfael. “Draw that sword on your hip and let us see what you can do.”

“No,” said Sarfael.

“Are you a coward?” yelled Parnadiz.

“No more than most sensible men. Dueling is outlawed, young hothead, and your teacher says you hold to the law. Besides, if I draw my sword, it will all end with blood on the floor and somebody needing to clean it and somebody sent to fetch a healer. A poor showing for my first day among you.”

“This lesson is done,” said Elyne, stepping between the two men. “Parnadiz, your anger will trip you as often as your feet. Control both, and stop rushing your attacks.”

“I can protect myself,” Sarfael said to her.

She shrugged her shoulders. “I am sure you can. But I must look to the welfare of all my students, even the reckless.”

Sarfael bowed and moved out of her way. “Perhaps you and I can duel, for practice only, when the others leave.”

She chewed her lip and looked him slowly up and down. “I think we have been dueling, have we not? But I’m not sure who has won.”

“Perhaps we should call it a draw,” he said with a true smile. “For I have no wish for argument.”

Elyne turned to her other students, gesturing to Sarfael. “This is not one who you can prick and then disengage,” she said. “If you mark him in a fight, be prepared to finish it for real. Now, return to your homes and, remember, what is learned here is for sport, not injury.”

Sarfael let out the breath that he had been holding with a relieved but muffled sigh. The lady seemed inclined to take him as he wished, something of a rogue but no threat to her or her students. That argued well for him keeping his skin whole for that night at least.

With backward glances, and much whispering, the others left. Only Montimort lingered, until Elyne drove him out with rejoinders to find his supper and come back the next day.

Elyne walked the room, checking that all the practice weapons were aligned within their racks, rearranging the stones into new patterns for the next day’s lessons, and finally reaching for a long-handled broom propped in the corner.

Sarfael gently lifted it from her hands. “A small payment for today’s lesson,” he said to her.

“Oh I doubt that you learned anything from me,” she replied, leaning back on one of the practice butts and watching him sweep. He counted it another sign of victory that she let him do the humble chore.

Still, he wondered how much she believed about his earlier lies of having family ties to Neverwinter. She seemed a cautious duelist, preferring to keep her opponent clearly before her. But, her hand was off her sword hilt, which showed more trust than the beginning of their encounter.

“I did learn something today,” he said, trying to draw her out and assess her mood. “I learned that I show my skills too quickly. Pride made me boast, and that was foolish.”

She shrugged. “Sometimes, it can save you from the fight. It made the others stop and think.”

Sarfael said no more but kept to his cleaning, making even strokes across the floor as he learned long before when he played the servant in a high-class inn that catered to a privileged and talkative crowd. Sometimes silence was better than questions for luring the wary into conversation.

“May I see it?” Elyne finally asked. “That sword that you would not draw?”

With a nod, he unhooked the scabbard from his belt and presented it to her with the hilt foremost. He knew the risk, to give away his weapon so easily, except he would never truly surrender Mavreen’s sword. However, he already judged Elyne to be an honorable woman, as evidenced by her earlier actions with her students, most especially the young Luskar, and he felt that the sword was safe with her. It was a feeling that surprised him slightly, for he rarely trusted anyone since Mavreen’s death.

Elyne half turned away from Sarfael and drew the blade forth, carefully and cleanly, a practiced move to protect the edge.

She held it balanced in her right hand, twisting only her wrist to examine it from all sides. Two passes in the air, high and low, and then she sheathed it with the same careful attention.

“The balance is very fine and the edge exceptional,” she said. “But you have the height and the length of arm to carry a longer blade.”

“You could tell that from the scabbard,” he rejoined, taking the sword back from her. “So why look so close?”

“Some blades are enchanted, and the enchantment makes it worth carrying a lesser sword. But not this, I think. A well-forged rapier, nothing more, made for a smaller man or a woman.”

“It was a woman,” he admitted with the utmost truth. Lies he always told with honeyed-tongue ease, but, for Mavreen’s memorial, the sword’s story never varied and his voice always sounded rough when he told it. “She died and I did not.”

It took Rucas Sarfael four days to attain an invitation from Elyne to rob one of General Sabine's armories.

"We must assume that this is a test," Dhafiyand said.

"Oh, most certainly, it is a test, but it was designed earlier for the rest of the brats. She's not happy about it," Sarfael said as he paced back and forth in the old man's room. "Elyne is forbidden to accompany us. But she and other Nashers will meet us when the task is done to take charge of whatever we carry away."

"And how do you know she is unhappy about this?"

"Montimort told me that she has put off this raid three times already. And been reprimanded for the delay. So I went to the lady and told her that I knew a certain cache of weapons that would be easy to steal—better than easy, one that would pose little risk for her students. You will find me such a thing, I assume?"

Dhafiyand waved one ink-stained hand in assurance. "It can be arranged without much difficulty. The question is whether or not we inform the general that she must sacrifice a few weapons for our purposes. On the whole, I think it better to leave her in the dark and make our own arrangements."

"As you wish. It makes no matter to me."

"What else have you learned?"

"Very little of use to you." Sarfael continued his perambulation around the room, stopping to admire a miniature painting. Framed in silver and pearls, it showed a delicate young moon elf peering out at the world. Sarfael wondered who the lady was and how her portrait came to grace the spymaster's collection of trinkets. Dhafiyand had a crow's propensity of picking up shiny little treasures to line his nest.

"They are brats, these so-called Nashers, young idiots for the most part. Most of Elyne's students are still barely out of their teens," he said to Dhafiyand. "Their foolish parents stuffed their heads with stories of a Neverwinter that is no more."

"But they talk of sedition?"

“They daydream, no more than that. Gnash their teeth about Neverember as you said and take that for a nickname to make themselves sound fierce. Children’s games, I tell you.” Having fully circled the room, Sarfael leaned his broad shoulders against the mantel and crossed his arms. “Idle chatter about reclaiming the throne and finding a royal heir to unite the ancient families and bring back the splendors of the past fills their days. Truly, if they, and their teacher, are the biggest threat Lord Neverember faces, then we should look for sport elsewhere. Red Wizards, perhaps?”

Dhafiyand ignored the last remark. “Have you heard any talk of a crown?”

“A crown?” Sarfael frowned. “Not at all. Why do you ask?”

“Rumors, most likely nothing more than hot air, but I would know where they started.”

“If I hear of such a thing, I will add it to my report.”

“Do so. But they mean to overthrow Lord Neverember?”

“Oh, in the vaguest possible way. Press them about it, and none have any plans.”

“Still, you admit that you have not met the true leaders yet.”

“No, the purpose of this expedition is to prove our loyalty and thus promote us in the ranks of rebellion.”

“Then go forth and rise high,” said Dhafiyand. “And remember, if you hear talk of a crown, bring the news to me at once.”

Sarfael nodded. “But first, find me a nice little armory that my young friends can raid without risking my skin.”

“Consider it done,” Dhafiyand said. “I will send word to you in a day or so.”



The patrol passed the doorway where they lurked, a resounding clatter of boots on pavement and the rattle of armor on burly men and women. It might be well past midnight, but they made no attempt at silence, nor did they seem worried about waking anyone sleeping nearby. Or perhaps the neighbors counted it a blessing to hear the heavy tread of Tarnian mercenaries beneath their windows

every night. Far worse things could come shuffling out of the shadows in Neverwinter.

Sarfael counted beneath his breaths. A slow count to twenty, according to Dhafiyand, and then the patrol would turn and be lost behind the next street's ramshackle buildings. If Sarfael and his crew could clear out the weapons from the armory before dawn, the second patrol would miss them completely.

Behind his back, he could feel Montimort Ratlyn shiver, but, to give the boy his due, he thought it was excitement and not fear that made the thin young Luskar whisper in his ear, "Are they past?"

He motioned for silence. "Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two," he finished, going a little longer just for safety's sake. The sound of the Tarnian patrol faded into the distance. "Wait here, I'll check the door. Better one man be spotted than a gang of ten young ruffians, so obviously up to no good."

Fog filled the street, the cold night air rising off Neverwinter's perpetually warm river providing its usual shroud over the night's activities. Even so, Sarfael ventured with many glances up and down the street to check the armory's door.

As Dhafiyand promised, the door was unlocked. Sarfael bent over the knob, hiding his hands with his body from the Nashers watching across the street. Let them think him an accomplished lockpick; it could only enhance his reputation.

He opened the door and slipped inside, then poked his head out again to motion the others to follow.

They hurried across the street, Parnadiz and Charinyn in the lead, as usual, with the rest following hard on their heels.

Once they were all inside, he pulled the door closed. They were immediately plunged into darkness.

"Light," he muttered.

"Sorry," Montimort whispered back. A glowing light appeared cupped in his long fingers, flowing outward until the room was clearly lit.

"Lanterns too," Sarfael ordered the Nashers. They carried three dark lanterns in the group.

“What do we need them for?” Parnadiz said. “We have Montimort.”

“Think of him as a candle,” Sarfael said. “If he snuffs out, how do you see to rescue him or yourselves?”

Montimort squeaked at the description and Sarfael dropped a friendly hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Magic is a useful talent,” he said. “But never assume that it can keep you from being killed.”

In the back of his head, Mavreen laughed to hear him quote her so earnestly. But it was good advice. Her spells and other tricks did nothing to protect her from Thayan treachery.

“Now what?” said Charinyn. The tiny room in which they stood was remarkably bare of weapons. In fact, it was completely empty. Further, the only door in evidence was the one that they had used to enter.

“You don’t think they’d leave a stack of swords and armor stacked inside the door for you to snatch?” Sarfael said. Except, as he looked with dismay around the room, that was exactly what Dhafiyand had promised him. It seemed the old man’s intelligence was not perfect. With more confidence than he felt, Sarfael told the others: “Look for a false wall. The weapons will be behind that.”

Montimort’s nose quivered as he turned in a half circle, surveying the antechamber.

“There’s a draft,” he said, pointing to his left. “I smell old leather and metal. And something else …”

Sarfael tapped his fingers along the area that Montimort indicated and found the second door, neatly hidden behind a simple illusion. As soon as he put his hand upon the latch, the door appeared. Like the other, it was unlocked.

“Ah, that’s better,” said Sarfael as he swung the door open. Raising high his lantern, he saw the twinkle of shields, swords, mauls, short-bows, halberds, battle-axes, and other weapons.

“Well, let’s clear this out,” he said over his shoulder.

Then Montimort’s “something else” leaped upon him with an outraged scream.

Sarfael rolled back into the room.

A hound with short, rust red fur tumbled into the antechamber with him. Its sooty black teeth snapped in his face. Sarfael grappled the hellish dog by the throat as its powerful hind legs raked against the floor. Sarfael twisted underneath to avoid being disemboweled by the creature's nasty kick.

Above him the young Nashers screamed and yelled at each other as Sarfael strove to keep the hound's sharp black teeth out of his face. The monster at his throat growled. Wisps of sulfurous smoke emerged from its nostrils. Sarfael gritted his own teeth and heaved at the weight bearing him down. Most obviously, it was no ordinary guard dog.

As he wrestled with the creature, he cursed Dhafiyand silently for not inquiring more closely as to why that armory seemed so open and unprotected. The lack of information might well spell his doom, and the spy considered himself poorly served by the spymaster as he fought to save himself.

A whiff of brimstone, a laughing ghost,
and talk of a crown …

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